WHAT IS SOCIAL HISTORY? 1

By H. J. PERKIN, M.A.

ASSISTANT LECTURER IN SOCIAL HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Judged by the usual criteria of academic disciplines, social history as a separate study can scarcely be said to exist: there are no chairs and, if we omit local history, no departments, no learned journals, and few if any textbooks. There seems to be something approaching agreement about its elder brother. "There is now a virtual consensus of opinion", wrote J. F. Rees some years ago, "on the scope of economic history. It includes a study of the state of agriculture, industry, commerce and transport, together with an elucidation of the more technical problems of currency, credit, and taxation." He goes on to say, "These subjects necessarily involve an examination and description of social conditions. In fact the line between the economic and the social cannot be strictly drawn." 2 Sir Maurice Powicke writes in a similar vein: "Political and social history are in my view two aspects of the same process. Social life loses half its interest and political movements lose most of their meaning if they are considered separately." 3

On social history, then, there seems to be only confusion. Is it, in the words of G. M. Trevelyan, "the history of a people with the politics left out", 4 or, in those of A. L. Rowse, how society consumes what it has produced? 5 Is it economic history without "the more technical problems of currency, credit, and taxation", or even without the economics? Is it, stripped to the skeleton, simply how men spent their leisure hours? All

1 A paper read to a joint meeting of the economic historians of Liverpool and Manchester Universities, 19th May 1953.
3 Henry III and the Lord Edward, p. v.
4 English Social History, p. vii.
5 The Use of History, p. 69.
these definitions seem to me inadequate. Should we, and if so how can we, distinguish it from political or economic history, or even from general history? For, as Sir Lewis Namier has remarked, "human affairs being the subject matter of history, all human pursuits and disciplines in their social aspects enter into it." What is the field of the social historian? How can we find a place for him?

I suspect that the social historian, like many others, is here the victim of a metaphor which bedevils even the most casual methodological remark. I mean the agrarian metaphor of "fields of study". According to this the busy cultivators of the academic soil divide it up into allotments on each of which, by a natural division of labour, each cultivator raises the kind of crops (of facts, hypotheses and generalizations) the ground and green fingers will yield. The "ploughland, plotted and pieced," of human knowledge is parcelled out like a great open field after enclosure—and woe to the tenant who cannot show a title-deed! The social historian finds his crops still stubbornly growing athwart his neighbours' hedges, and he must trespass, or become a hired labourer serving several masters. Finding a place for him seems an ungrateful task.

But "studies", "subjects", "disciplines", are not fields, and facts are not crops to be privately harvested and garnered. Facts belong to that category of "goods" which can be shared without being diminished. All facts are grist to the student's mill, provided his mill will grind them. The outcome of his labours depends on his choice of facts, and this depends on his interests, on the questions he wishes to ask.

Historians know this better than most students, for does not "history" come from a Greek word for an inquiry? All historians start with a question, however frequently they have to change it as they work. What happened? How did it happen? Why? Or at the very least: what will these documents tell me about the past? The social historian differs from other historians only in the questions he asks and the answers he seeks. Finding

1 "History, its Subject-matter and Tasks", in History Today, March 1952, p. 161.
a place for him does not entail a re-allocation of holdings. It merely involves allowing him access to the evidence.

Social history might be thought to be the historical counterpart of sociology, which "ideally . . . has for its field the whole life of man in society". But all historians ask questions about the life of man in society. What characterizes the questions of the social historian? The word "social" is, prima facie, not a help. The Oxford English Dictionary gives thirteen major usages (some of them obsolete). Not one of them covers all that is implied in "social history", or, if it does, covers too much. By virtue of its derivation the word seems at one time or another to have attached itself (in the human sphere alone) to any and every idea or relationship in any way connected with the grouping of men for whatever purpose. For "social" is an omnibus word covering in the first instance all those human activities which display awareness of others. Semantics fails us: we must fall back on common sense.

W. W. Rostow, attempting to "relate economic forces to social and political events", has written: "It is a useful convention to regard society as made up of three levels, each with a life and continuity of its own, but related variously to the others. These three levels are normally designated as economic, social and political." However useful, it is still, of course, a convention. All three "levels" inhere, if anywhere, in each and every member of society. Society, like the universe, is one and indivisible. It is impossible to isolate, except metaphorically, any one of the "levels", however lively and continuous its existence within the whole. Even to claim primacy for the impulses from one level is no more than to assert that in each man one kind of interest, appetite, desire or motivation, predominates. Put in this way the determinist case becomes an interpretation of the nature of man. It may still hold, but the proofs are metaphysical, and the determinist must meet Professor Ryle's thesis that a man is a single entity, not a bundle of discreet parts and qualities. Men in the past, as we today, lived simultaneously

1 M. Ginsberg, Sociology, p. 7.
2 British Economy of the Nineteenth Century, p. 134.
on all three levels, without any division of themselves into abstract "men", either political, economic or social.

But, like the universe, society cannot be viewed from all sides at once. The spectacular success of the natural sciences since the seventeenth century springs from the device of abstraction, by which the scientist is able to concentrate on a limited number of eminently answerable questions. Abstraction does not change the world, it merely focusses the attention of the observer. In the study of history, of men in past society, it is the difference in focus which justifies the three-fold division of labour. Each specialist has his own focus of attention, his own point of view, his own techniques and tools, his own informing link with an appropriate analytical science (political studies, economics, or sociology). It is the labour, we note, not the final product, and in many cases not the raw material, which is divided. Social history is not a part of history. It is, in Professor Redford's phrase, all history from the social point of view.

But what is the social point of view? "The social level" (as viewed by Rostow) "is very broad indeed. It includes the way people live, the culture and religion which they generate and regard as acceptable, their scientific pursuits, and above all the general political concepts which serve to rationalize their relationship to the community."¹ This last point is surprising, though less so in a later form: "the manner in which general ideas are formed which serve as the basis for a considerable array of political positions on particular issues." G. M. Trevelyan, who takes a similar view of the intermediate role of social life between what are usually called the economic basis and the political superstructure, defines the scope of social history as "the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages: this includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose out of these general conditions of life, and took ever changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought."²

¹ Rostow, loc. cit. ² Trevelyan, loc. cit.
So far we are fellow-travellers: but one feels it is not far enough. Social history, on this pattern, is still auxiliary, peripheral, invertebrate, not, in Professor Toynbee's terminology, an intelligible field of study, nor even an articulation of one. There are some for whom even this is too much, who would confine social history to the kitchen, the wardrobe, the sports-field, the ballroom, the garden-party, the tap-room, and the green circle round the maypole. All these are fascinating places, provided they are seen in significant relation to the wider world of which they form part. What is to be avoided is antiquarianism, the compilation of undigested facts in unpalatable lists without significance or inspiration. Social history of this kind is prone to suffer from the defect remarked by H. P. R. Finberg of the local historians of the old school: it lacks a central unifying theme.

Local history of the "new school", as it has developed in the twentieth century under F. M. Stenton, W. G. Hoskins and others, gives us the clue. Its central unifying theme seems to be none other than the social history of local communities. I am far from suggesting that social history, like the Department of Local History at Leicester, should take "the local history of all England for its province", though this would certainly have many advantages: Sir Maurice Powicke long ago acclaimed "the study of local history as the basis of the intimate understanding of social change". What I have in mind is that the social historian should take his society, and try to see it whole. That is, in addition to studying the daily life of its members—in the wide sense intended by Trevelyan—he should concern himself with society qua society, with social activities and institutions as such, irrespective of their end or purpose.

This is the plan adopted by A. L. Rowse in his excellent study of the structure of society in The England of Elizabeth. There he essays to "expose and portray" the whole society, to "extract the juices of the social" from government and economic matters, parliament and the church, law, education and the cul-

1 The Local Historian and his Theme, p. 17 (University College of Leicester Department of Local History, Occasional Papers, No. 1.).
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tivation of the land; wherever in short they can be found. "Only so is it possible to write the book and give it coherent form." Social life as an end in itself, the intricate and infinitely varied patterns worked within this frame, he wisely postpones until the frame's construction is laid bare.¹

The political and the economic historian are aware of the social framework underpinning the economy and the political system at every point. The shape and structure of society, its growth and decline, the physical distribution of its members by region and district, town, village and homestead, and their social distribution in the "bands of prestige" we call classes,² all these affect and are affected by events on the levels of politics and economics. The political or economic historian is often driven to ask questions about them, but they are not his primary concern. He is not interested in them for their own sake, but only as they affect the economy or political affairs. Except indirectly, they are not his questions; but they are the social historian's starting point.

The best example of what I mean is the study of population, now a discipline in itself, with its own name, techniques and journals. Its protagonists point out that it requires the aid of many different specialisms—statistics, medicine, biology, dietetics, economics, sociology—and its findings must be taken into account by all who study society, from whatever point of view. In the words of one demographer, "the significance of population phenomena lies in the meaning for human activity. Population numbers mean markets, military forces, land values. Deaths mean ill-health and disabilities."³ He might have added that fewer deaths and fewer births mean an aging population, leading to many new problems, political and economic as well as social. The effects are inexorable, the ramifications endless; and the twenty year old conclusion on the crucial population changes of the period during and since the industrial revolution is that the facts of population have been more cause than effect in the

¹ The England of Elizabeth, Preface.
² W. J. H. Sprott, Sociology, p. 98.
economic history of England. Yet in spite of its difficulties and implications, the study of population is central to the social historian's purpose. Demography as a practical science is a branch of sociology: as a historical study it is a branch of social history.

As for the study of institutions, the House of Lords or the Stock Exchange is just as legitimate a topic for the social historian as the kitchen or the wardrobe. Indeed, the social origins of the peerage and the class-connections of stock-brokers both cry out for systematic investigation. Every institution, from trial by ordeal to the modern factory, from partible inheritance to political patronage, has its social aspect. Its interest for the social historian is intensified if it throws light on the way in which the society maintains and renews itself, distributes prestige or status, and solves or frets at the recurring problems of adjustment to its environment and its neighbours.

Light may be found in the most improbable places. Sir Maurice Powicke says of the thirteenth century tournament: "The inducements to violence were too great to allow room for restraint. In the early days, if not later, prisoners might be held to ransom; the booty in valuable horses and equipment might always be large; victory could lead to fortune as well as to fame. The Earl Marshal's prowess in the tournament had laid the foundations of a career which had led to a rich marriage and an earldom; and, although he was certainly an exceptional man, it would be easy to underrate the influence of these martial gatherings on the social fortunes of young men in succeeding generations." There is a clear example of social mobility, all the more important in an age when the opportunities for social advancement were relatively few.

Pilgrimage to the relics of saints might be thought a social activity of some interest, but not much far-reaching significance. In a recent book remarkable for its consistently social approach to general European history, R. W. Southern writes of the tenth

and eleventh centuries: "The deficiencies in human resources were supplied by the power of the saints. They were the great power-houses in the fight against evil; they filled the gaps left in the structure of human justice. The most revealing map of Europe in these centuries would be a map, not of political or commercial capitals, but of the constellation of sanctuaries, the points of material contact with the unseen world." So succinctly is characterized the religious orientation and springs of action of an entire, if small, international society. When he recalls that Rome was the sanctuary of many saints, above all of the two great apostles, a flood of light is thrown on the origins of Papal supremacy.

In my view, then, social history is nothing more and nothing less than the history of society. If this is an Odyssey indeed, it has its wayside hazards. On the one side there is, since nothing human happens outside society, the whirlpool of exhaustiveness, of totality, the end of those "still climbing after knowledge infinite". On the other side prowls the devouring monster of social science.

First, the history of society is not the history of everything that happens in society. That is total history, ideal history, that complete understanding of mankind's past which every true historian dreams of, works towards, and (since he cannot travel simultaneously by land, sea, and air) forsakes only as a means, not as an end. The social historian must avoid the attempt to be everywhere at once: He must keep firmly in view his immediate goal, the understanding of the daily life of men in the past, in its setting of society and institutions.

Secondly, social history is not a branch of sociology. It does not seek practical knowledge, descriptive laws, governing principles, predictive generalizations, or what Professor Homans (emulating Clerk-Maxwell) calls "the nine field-equations" of the science of human relations. It is, first and last, a kind of history. Like all history, it is concerned with "concrete events fixed in time and space"—that is, with particular societies at particular times in particular places. These the social historian

1 The Making of the Middle Ages, p. 137. 2 L. B. Namier, op. cit. p. 157.
studies for their own sake, as an end in themselves, without reference to the practical utility of what he discovers. If an ulterior end is required, it is the hope that "Histories make men wise". Economic history in its early days had to resist the economists' demand that it be "governed by the desire to illustrate economic laws". The social historian differs from the sociologist precisely as the economic historian from the economist. He confronts the same material, he may even use similar techniques, but he asks different questions, seeks a different end.

Social history, to justify itself, must ultimately issue in actual social histories. At present it seems to be in, or just emerging from, the situation Cunningham remarked of economic history nearly forty years ago: "There have been numerous histories of one or another department of economic activity, as for example, merchant shipping, or agriculture, or of particular localities; but comparatively little progress has been made in surveying the growth of economic activities in their interconnection, and the development of the body Economic as a whole." Now, there is nothing at all to be said against histories of departments of any kind of history, least of all social history. The more there are, the nearer draws the possibility of a comprehensive social history, and the better it will be when it comes. Moreover, there is no need for the specialist historian to consider too closely in what category his interest falls. Let him follow his question, his problem or his material where it will lead. If he cuts across categories, if like Newton he can unite two hitherto unrelated fields of experience, so much the better. He may be a genius, a man who sets others thinking in a way which was not possible before. His work in any event will have value for general history, and for some historians in particular. But, to paraphrase Cunningham, there will still be a need to survey the growth of social activities in their interconnection, and the development of the body social as a whole.

Of what ought a "comprehensive" social history to consist? First it should concern one society, fixed in space and time: Latin Christendom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries,

1 W. Cunningham, The Progress of Capitalism in England, p. 6, n. 2.
2 Ibid. p. 17.
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Middlesbrough in the Victorian age, England since 1500. What aspects of the society ought the social historian to follow through the viscissitudes of time, what themes ought he to unfold, as far as the evidence permits? In my view, he should pursue four major interrelated interests. The first is the society as it presents itself as an environment, both physical and social, to be lived in; the second, the manifold social life which is, as it were, woven on this loom; the third, how the inhabitants react upon their society and its groupings and institutions, to maintain or change it, to improve their place in it as individuals or as groups, and to ensure its continuance over the generations; the fourth (closely connected with the previous one) is the social problems with which the society has been faced, and its attempts at remedying them. These interests are not meant to be branches or departments of the study, a rigid scaffolding to which all social historians must conform. The presentation of the society’s story, the priority or weight given to its various features, the balance of the whole, should spring from the idiosyncracies of the material and the historian. Historiography is an art, not the compilation of answers to a questionnaire. The four interests are meant solely to suggest threads to be worked into the tapestry.

In the first the social historian is concerned with the “given element” into which the individual is born. It should include the size, shape and structure of the society (the distribution of the population, the class-system, etc.) and, since these can scarcely be understood without reference to the physical environment with which the society is intimately intermingled, its geographical background, the hard facts of topography, soil, climate and vegetation (in so far as they affect the life of man) and the ways in which these have been modified by human action. The social structure is something more than the system of classes and should include the whole complex of institutions and associations in and around which social life is lived—that is, family, church, professional body, trade union, club, guild, chivalrous order, and even the factory, political party or the organs of government; these last of course in, and only in, their social aspects.

The second interest is the social life which is lived within the framework of the first. Here the social historian must
reduce to order a multitude of topics, including the means and conditions of life—food, clothing, accommodation, furniture, conditions of labour, etc.; its modes—manners, fashion, etiquette; and its ends—family-life, religion, literature, the arts and music, and all other cultural and leisure-time activities and enjoyments, sports and pastimes. Perhaps he should go further and try to catch the quality or flavour of social life as a whole, as G. M. Young has done for the early Victorians; but this requires a long and intimate acquaintance, a rare intuition, and above all a sympathetic understanding of one generation, which may, indeed, mean one is out of tune with the next.

The third interest is the way the society, through its members, reacts upon itself. Here I am thinking of something more than Rowse’s brilliant notion of “the Elizabethan discovery of England”. It should include what sociologists call “social control”, the customs, “folkways”, or traditional morality by which society moulds its members, and persuades or forces them to conform with its own persistent patterns. Closely related to this is education, interpreted in the widest sense as all the arrangements for passing on and improving the social inheritance. Then there are the ways in which the various groups or classes react towards each other, by emulation or indifference, disdain or patronage, competition or conflict; and the way individuals overcome social disability and acquire or lose status by social movement between classes. Finally, there are the social ideals of the society in relation to which all such reactions and movements are aligned, and towards which attempts at social change are directed.

The fourth and last interest is what may be called social pathology; that is, social problems and the attempts at remedying them. These are what Cunningham had in mind when he wrote,¹ “We cannot understand the past unless we attempt to realize the precise problems of each age and the success or failure which attended human efforts to grapple with them”. The social historian might begin with the giants of our modern domestic epic, want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness; but there

are many others to be found in most societies in most ages—vice and violence, intolerance, civil strife, and the effects of war. Their remedies bring the social historian into the realms of government policy, social administration, police and punishment, and also into those of mutual aid, philanthropic endeavour and simple good-neighbourliness.

How the fruits of these enquiries should be presented is, I repeat, for the individual social historian, in the light of his particular society and period, to decide. A great deal may be learnt from local studies, in the handling of small societies over short periods. A danger to be avoided (as with the proverbial trees and the wood) is that of allowing the "topics" more prominence than the development of the whole. This, as Cunningham reminded us, is an old problem in economic history. The attempt to solve it has given much trouble to the editors of the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, as is evident from the change of plan in the second volume. In the social history of modern England, the most natural approach is to move forward by generations, giving, at the risk of some repetition in the "topics", a picture of each as a self-contained society, a temporal articulation of the larger study. Even this presents many difficulties. There is no ideal solution and only one touchstone, that the history, like poetry, should seem to come unforced, like the leaves to a tree.

The pursuit of his interests will often lead the social historian into waters frequented by other historians. Some of the answers he seeks or the evidence for them are already to be found between the covers of books clearly labelled political or economic history. The class-structure, for instance, is not the same thing as the division of income or of wealth. "The essence of social class", writes T. H. Marshall, "is the way a man is treated by his fellows (and, reciprocally, the way he treats them), not the qualities or the possessions which cause that treatment". ¹ But the acquisition of these qualities and possessions is, in part at least, an economic matter. Here the social historian is very near the whirlpool of totality. With those institutions and activities

¹ *Citizenship and Social Class*, p. 92.
we call the economic basis, and those others we call the political superstructure, he seems to have plunged right in.

But let us look at what J. R. McCulloch thought were the pre-requisites of the good economist: "The economist will not arrive at anything like a true knowledge of the laws regulating the production, accumulation, distribution and the consumption of wealth if he do not draw his materials from a very wide surface. He should study man in every situation; he should have recourse to the history of society, arts, commerce and civilization, to the works of legislators, philosophers, and travellers, to everything in short that can throw light on the causes which accelerate or retard the progress of nations . . .". McCulloch did not intend his economist should also be an art critic, cultural historian, philosopher, student of jurisprudence, or even traveller. He simply meant he should seek his answers wherever they might be found.

So it is with the social historian. He will welcome light from any source. Statistics of unemployment, or of wages and prices, or the commodities available for consumption, are all of immediate concern to him. So are the social policies and legislation of governments whether in the days of Burleigh or Beveridge. The economic historian, who has always had to take into account the actions of governments, will readily concede the point. The techniques of industry, or the interactions of the economy, the processes of the constitution or the strategy of warfare are not the social historian's first interest. He is concerned with them only as they affect social activities and institutions. It is a matter of focus, of priorities, of emphasis. He will not linger in the wake of political or economic history longer than it takes him to answer his questions. Though he may sail for a distance through the same waters, he will steer a different course, towards the understanding of society qua society, of social life as an end in itself.

We can put this to the test by considering those periods in which the political or economic element is particularly strong: the industrial revolution, say, or the early seventeenth century. How will the social historian deal with these?

Among the many questions he will ask about the industrial revolution, those which immediately stand out concern changes in the distribution of the population, the multiplication of consumer-goods (that access of mere "things" which so struck Sydney Smith), the social acceptibility of the factory master (was he, like Smith's Daniel Webster, "much like a steam-engine in trousers"?), and above all the question of the formation of new classes. Some of the answers are to be found or suggested in most of the economic histories of the age. But there are other questions which can hardly be dealt with as topics incidental to an economic theme. The period may be conceived as a great social drama, whose plot is the breakdown of an older organic society and the agonies which accompany the birth of a new, and whose climax coincides with the Regency.

Professor Tawney has made the social approach to the political conflicts of the seventeenth century his own. It is now well recognized that the Caroline turmoil was preceded and to some extent circumscribed by deep-rooted changes in the prosperity of certain classes. "The rise of the gentry" has become part of the terminology of the period. For Tawney, the causes were the diverse response of aristocracy and gentry to the economic problems of the century ending with the Civil War. Now, in his recent paper,1 H. R. Trevor-Roper has criticized his partition of the land-owning class and has substituted for it a distinction between those members of a single class who did and those who did not benefit from the profits of political office. He sees as the hard core of rebellion not the risen gentry foreclosing with their aristocratic debtors but the excluded landowners, noble and common, exasperated with their rivals, who grow rich at their expense. As a cause of rebellion this has a plausible ring: we might instance the indebtedness, recently noted by Professor Edward Hughes,2 of the Catholic supporters in the north-east of the 1715 Rising. We await Professor Tawney's rejoinder. Meanwhile we may note how the question turns on the analysis of social class. "Political history",

1 "The Gentry, 1540-1640", The Economic History Review Supplements, no. 1.
as Trevor-Roper says, "is often a commentary, a corrective and clarifying commentary, on social history and as such cannot be divorced from it." That is true—though marriage is happiest when the partners are not in each other's way all day long.

It is clear that the social historian, like McCulloch's economist, must "draw his materials from a very wide surface". His sources may be found in whatever has come down to us from the past, whether in manuscript or in print; the myriad artifacts (clothes, furniture, cooking pots, etc.) which are the instruments of daily life; the products of past culture; or the marks of old habitation on the face of the country. He must know only how to use them. With documents, he should be a skilled researcher; with objects, an archaeologist, and just as prepared to go out into the field; with books and pictures, not perhaps a connoisseur, but at least a dilettante, knowing something of their value and meaning. With them all, he should have a keen eye for what they can tell him about the past life of man in society.

F. R. Leavis believes that to use literary evidence or illustration intelligently the student of society or politics must be a trained literary critic: "Without the sensitizing familiarity with the subleties of language, and the insight into the relations between abstract or generalizing thought and the concrete of human experience, that the trained frequentation of literature alone can bring, the thinking that attends social or political studies will not have the edge and force it should." This is perhaps true—though he seems less acutely aware of the reciprocal need of the student of past literature to have studied, from non-literary sources, the society of which the literature is the outgrowth.

"The concrete of human experience" will certainly light up a generalization or a statistical analysis. For example, students of "the social class of Cambridge alumni" have concluded, inter alia, that the heirs of eighteenth and nineteenth century

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1 Op. cit. p. 44.
2 See the two papers "Literature and Society" and "Sociology and Literature" in The Common Pursuit.
3 The Common Pursuit, p. 194.
landowners did not distinguish themselves academically to the same extent as their fellow-students or younger brothers. How this conclusion comes alive when we read the anxious widow to her eldest boy at Magdalene! "Your promises aided by my strong affections prove powerful enough to make me give in to what you desire, even to forget past miscarriages if you'll be serious and make the best use of your time you possibly can for the future and study as much as in you lies to retrieve the precious time you have unhappily lost. In order to that you must drop all the Idle part of your acquaintance and they'll not care to trouble you if they find you intent upon a Book. Don't make much of your Self in a bad way. No philosopher in Cambridge will find occasion for more than fourscore pound a Year". Perhaps he had justified her earlier fears when "Sturbridge" Fair was drawing near "that all the silly Students will lose their time and innocence there," and ignored her advice "to get your Tutor to go along with you . . .". We are not surprised to learn that there is no record of Jack Egerton's graduation, or that Samuel and Thomas, who did not go to Cambridge, became successful merchants in Venice and Holland.

As to the rest of Dr. Leavis's argument (though he has some penetrating questions to suggest to the social historian) what is to be remembered, I suggest, is that no self-respecting historian would rely on evidence from one source alone. He would not expect Moll Flanders to be typical of the women of Defoe's age—she is patently too much herself for that—but he may legitimately expect her story to confirm impressions from other sources about the life of the London poor, the attitude towards them of their "betters", the position of dowryless women, or the chronic fear on the part of parish authorities of the birth of fatherless children.

2 Egerton Papers, undated letter, E. Egerton to John Egerton, c. 1729.
3 Ibid. August, 1728.
The point may be put less equivocally in relation to painting. One does not have to be an art critic to realize the value for the social historian of Ford Madox Brown's "Work" in the Manchester City Art Gallery. Here, for those who can recognize it, is a microcosm of society in 1852: the equestrian gentry; the middle-class ladies with crinoline, sunshade and inevitable tract—"The Hodman's Haven, or Drink for Thirsty Souls"; the thirsty hodman downing a pint; the clean-drawn navvy in all the dignity of labour; the "uppsih" craftsman with button-hole, watch-chain and copy of The Times; the sleeping tramps; the shame-faced ragged messenger bearing flowers; the sandwich-board men—and women; the orange-girl being "moved along"; the intellectuals leaning on the fence—the one on the left is said to be Carlyle; the merry urchins, the underfed baby with its sad, old-man's face, and, of course, the mongrels. On the frame there is the homily, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread". Even the work has a mid-Victorian flavour: they appear to be mending a sewer.

The multitude of sources and the many-sidedness of social life bring us face to face with the general problem of how far the social historian needs to be a specialist in an impossibly long list of varied topics. Fortunately Professor Butterfield, in his approach to the history of science, has pointed the way towards a solution. It is that the scientist's interest in its history is in the evolution of modern techniques and theories, while the historian's is in the significance of past science—even when it lies in an evolutionary cul-de-sac—in the thought and experience of contemporaries. One does not have to be a natural scientist to trace significance, nor does one have to be a musician, an architect, a book-maker or a doctor to trace the significance of music, architecture, horse-racing or public health in the social life of the past. One merely needs to be well-informed, intelligent and a skilled historian. An educated man, it has been said, is one who can read every page of The Times with intelligence. But that does not mean he needs to be an expert in diplomacy, the law, finance, fashion-designing, theatrical production, undertaking and the construction of crossword puzzles. The ideal social historian is the ideally educated man.
In spite of the plaintive introduction with which this paper began, the neglect of social history is only apparent. A great deal of it is being done. Not only are there "comprehensive" social histories in progress, like Dr. Rowse’s *The Elizabethan Age* or Professor Hughes’s *North Country Life in the Eighteenth Century*. There are also signs of growing appreciation of the social approach to political and general history. The most notable, of course, is the plan of the proposed history of parliament. Its method, the outgrowth of the practice of Professors Namier and Neale, will be the biographical study of as many members as are known.\(^1\) It is, indeed, a sociological technique, that of the best kind of social survey: case-histories treated statistically. The result, which should be of equal value to the social as to the political historian, will be, in Sir Lewis Namier’s words, "a demographic study of the most significant group-formation in the life of this country".\(^2\) To me it suggests what may well become the starting-point of a new approach to general history, in which all three kinds of historian may learn to work together as a team: the study of what Pareto and Toynbee have taught us to call élites, and the interrelation and interaction of their political power, economic strength and social prestige or magnetism.

Professor Habbakuk has already shown the kind of contribution the social historian can make to such a study in his inquiry into the arrangements by which the seventeenth and eighteenth century landowners provided for their families.\(^3\) Here is a study near to the social historian’s heart, the rôle of the family in the maintenance of the class-system. At the same time it has the widest implications. Here as well as in his consideration of rates of interest and the price of land,\(^4\) Professor Habbakuk reaches the conclusion that many economic transactions in that very acquisitive age were governed by

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\(^2\) Namier, loc. cit.


extra-economic motives, among them the secure establish­ment of rich men’s descendents in positions of prestige.

This leads me to a very important aspect of social history, its concern with the ends men have sought: prestige, admiration, culture, fame, knowledge, unreflecting enjoyment, family life, philanthropy, spiritual peace, or a vicarious eternal life in the seed of their loins. Political and economic activities are for most men simply means to these ends. It is necessary to go beyond the political and economic systems to discover why men engage in them. The impulses from the social level are in a special sense primary. I am not putting forward a new kind of determinism: men, we may still believe, choose their ends; they are not chosen by them. Determinism, we have seen, is at bottom an interpretation of the nature of man. Those who pursue it seem to me to impute to the majority of men, or at least to the majority of those in key positions, the pathological ends of a few: power or acquisition as ends in themselves.

There is plenty of evidence for a growing interest, outside academic circles as well as within, in the questions of the social historian. The sustained interest of adult classes in local history of the “new school” is a random example. Every generation has its own interest in the past, its own version of the perennial question of Milton’s Adam, “How came I thus, how here?” This may or may not be the century of the common man—it is much more likely the century of the uncommon expert—but its interest in the past can only be described as social. It wants to know not so much how things worked but how it felt to be alive; how men in history—ordinary men, not kings and statesmen—lived and worked and thought and behaved towards each other. “Social questions”, as Beatrice Webb confided to herself as long ago as 1884, “are the vital questions of today: they take the place of religion.”¹ In 1953 they take the place of everything, at least in politics, even in foreign politics. There is no need to ask further for the interest in social history.

My Apprenticeship, p. 149 (MS. Diary for 1884).